
2003

County Commissioners Poll:

**Commissioners' Perspectives on Current
Issues Affecting Colorado Counties**



COUNTY ISSUES

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Budget Constraints, Water, and the Economy Predicted to be Top County Issues in 2003

Budget constraints, water, and economic concerns will be the top three issues confronting Colorado counties in 2003, according to the latest County Commissioners Poll conducted by the Colorado Department of Local Affairs. 110 commissioners, representing 61 of the state's 64 counties, participated in the study, which was conducted by mail between October 15 and December 22, 2002.

Specifically, nearly one in three commissioners (31%) identified **budget constraints** as the "most important" county issue for 2003, followed closely by **water** (27%) and **economic concerns** (24%). Rounding out the top five issues are **growth** (9%) and a tie between **transportation issues** (7%) and **infrastructure needs** (7%). (*See Table 1.*)

The percentage of commissioners identifying **budget constraints** as the top county issue has more than doubled, from 14% to 31%, since the 2001 Poll, while the percentage citing **water** as the top issue has increased sevenfold, 4% to 27%, as a result of statewide drought conditions. Meanwhile, the percentage of commissioners citing **economic concerns** as the top county issue has been growing steadily during the recent recession and subsequent anemic recovery, going from 9% in 1999, to 18% in 2001, and to 24% in 2003. (*See Table 1.*)

The 2003 Commissioners Poll marks the first time since the Poll's inception in 1997 that **growth** is not the number one issue for Colorado counties. Specifically, the percentage of commissioners citing **growth** as the top issue fell from 30% in 2001 to 9% in 2003. To discount growth as a major issue in Colorado, however, would be a mistake. More than one in four commissioners (26%), for example, still feel that growth is one of the top three issues in their counties, and a majority indicate that **increasing demands on local services and facilities due to growth** (70%) and **paying for growth impacts** (56%) continue to be "major or moderate problems." Moreover, the problem of **increasing demands on local services and facilities due to growth** is perceived to be one of the top ten issues that are "growing worse" (58%). (*See Tables 1, 2, 4 and 8.*)

The issues tracking segment of the 2003 Commissioners Poll identified a number of factors pressuring county budgets. **Insurance costs**, for example, is considered to be a “major or moderate problem” by nine out of ten commissioners (92%) surveyed, and also tops the list of county problems that are perceived to be “growing worse” (89%). (*See Tables 3 and 4.*)

Other budgetary pressures that are considered to be “major or moderate problems” by a significant majority of commissioners include **funding federal/state mandates** (85%), **economic conditions in general** (80%), **increased demands on services and facilities due to growth** (70%), **impact of natural disaster on the local economy** (69%), **statutory revenue and spending limits** (67%), and the **need for more state and federal aid** (66%). (*See Tables 6, 7, and 8.*)

Declining sales tax revenue is an additional, growing source of budgetary stress for some Colorado counties. Currently, nearly half of the commissioners whose counties levy sales taxes (48%) feel that **declining sales tax revenue** is a “major or moderate problem,” and nearly two-thirds (63%) believe the problem is “growing worse.” (*See Table 4.*) At the present time, 50 of the state’s 64 counties levy sales taxes, which account for 25% of the counties’ total revenue for general government activities.

Results of the county issues tracking also suggest that commissioners’ concerns regarding **the economy** go beyond the current recession and slow recovery. Four out of five commissioners, for example, report that **lack of jobs that pay living wages** (84%), **need for economic development** (80%), and **need for economic diversification** (79%) are “major or moderate problems” in their counties that need long-term solutions. **Preserving the agricultural economy** (69%), **availability of affordable child-care** (66%), and **lack of infrastructure to attract new businesses** (64%) are additional economic issues described as “major or moderate problems” by a majority of commissioners. (*See Table 9.*)

The Commissioners Poll also tracks perceived changes in 50 issues and problems commonly affecting Colorado counties. Topping the list of issues that commissioners feel are “growing worse” are rising **insurance costs** (89%), **economic conditions in general** (77%), **availability of water** (76%), **impact of natural disasters** (drought, fires, floods, etc.) (75%), **maintaining quality county services with tighter budgets** (72%), and **declining sales tax revenues** (63%). (*See Table 4.*)

Issues receiving the greatest acknowledgement for improving include **upgrading county information systems** (27%), **county government relations with municipalities and districts** (26%), **preparing/updating county master plans** (25%), **quality of public education** (22%), **land use, zoning, and planning issues** (22%), and **highway/road maintenance and development** (19%). (*See Table 5.*)

Counties provide a number of vital services to Colorado citizens including law enforcement, road construction and maintenance, social services, land use planning and zoning, cultural and recreational services, health services, elections coordination, public records maintenance, and administration of state motor vehicle laws. Many counties also run enterprise activities such as hospitals, nursing homes, airports, correctional facilities, and transit systems.

The County Commissioners Poll was inaugurated in 1997 by the Colorado Department of Local Affairs and is updated every two years. The purpose of the Poll is to fulfill, in part, the department’s statutory responsibility to inform state lawmakers and citizens about the issues affecting local governments in Colorado.

TABLE 1: Most Important County Issue*

Issue	2003	2001	1999	1997
Budget constraints	31.2%	14.1%	25.3%	17.7%
Water issues	26.6%	3.7%	4.0%	2.5%
Economic concerns	23.9%	17.6%	9.1%	10.1%
Growth-related issues	9.2%	29.9%	37.4%	39.2%
Transportation issues	7.4%	9.2%	8.1%	6.3%
Infrastructure needs	7.4%	7.4%	4.0%	2.6%
Health care issues	3.7%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%
Housing issues	2.8%	5.6%	5.1%	3.8%
Governmental relations	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%	3.8%
Welfare reform	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	5.1%
All other issues	1.2%	11.8%	12.2%	14.0%

TABLE 2: Three Most Important County Issues (Combined Mentions)*

Issue	2003	2001	1999	1997
Budget constraints	68.8%	27.1%	58.6%	43.0%
Economic concerns	67.0%	62.6%	31.3%	35.4%
Water issues	51.4%	12.2%	7.1%	10.1%
Growth-related issues	25.7%	64.4%	82.8%	82.2%
Infrastructure needs	23.2%	24.3%	14.1%	21.6%
Transportation issues	21.8%	36.4%	34.3%	24.1%
Health care issues	15.6%	5.6%	4.0%	0.0%
Housing issues	11.9%	18.7%	9.1%	15.2%
Governmental relations	8.3%	14.1%	13.1%	7.6%
Environmental issues	6.4%	5.6%	4.0%	6.3%
All Other	31.1%	43.1%	34.4%	39.3%

*Q. "Looking ahead, what, in your opinion, are the three most important issues that your county will face in 2003?"

**TABLE 3: County Issues Tracking
Top 10 Issues Considered to be Major or Moderate Problems**

Item	Mean Rating*	Major Problem	Moderate Problem	Total
1. Insurance costs	3.65	74.0%	17.9%	91.9%
2. Impact of natural disaster (drought, fires, floods, etc.)	3.33	60.6%	19.1%	79.7%
3. Lack of jobs that pay “living wages”	3.33	51.1%	32.6%	83.7%
4. Maintaining quality county services with tighter budget	3.28	48.4%	35.1%	83.5%
5. Need to diversify economic base	3.26	47.8%	31.6%	79.4%
6. Need for economic development in general	3.24	47.4%	32.9%	80.3%
7. Unfunded federal/state mandates	3.24	41.2%	43.3%	84.5%
8. Availability of water	3.16	42.3%	37.1%	79.4%
9. Economic conditions	3.14	37.4%	42.5%	79.9%
10. Impact of natural disaster on local economy	3.05	46.0%	23.1%	69.1%

*Scale: 4=major problem, 3=moderate problem, 2=minor problem, and 1=no problem.

**TABLE 4: County Issues Tracking
Top 10 Issues Considered to be Growing Worse**

Item	Growing Worse	Major or Moderate Problem
1. Insurance costs	89.0%	91.9%
2. Economic conditions	76.5%	79.9%
3. Availability of water	76.3%	79.4%
4. Impact of natural disaster (drought, fires, floods, etc.)	75.2%	79.7%
5. Maintaining quality county services with tighter budget	72.0%	83.5%
6. Impact of natural disaster on local economy	64.4%	69.1%
7. Declining sales tax revenues	62.6%	48.1%
8. Increasing demands on local services & facilities	58.2%	70.2%
9. Unfunded federal/state mandates	57.4%	84.5%
10. Preserving the agricultural economy	50.2%	69.2%

**TABLE 5: County Issues Tracking
Top 10 Issues Considered to be Improving**

Item	Improving	Major or Moderate Problem
1. Upgrading county information systems	26.5%	43.0%
2. County government relations with cities and districts	25.6%	16.6%
3. Preparing/updating county master plans	24.5%	34.1%
4. Improving quality of public education	22.4%	52.1%
5. Land use/zoning/planning issues	21.6%	42.8%
6. Highway/road maintenance and development	18.9%	76.4%
7. Population growth and development	11.6%	55.7%
8. Need for new prisons and jails	11.6%	34.6%
9. Insufficient open space, trails, or recreational facilities	11.5%	18.1%
10. Access to quality medical treatment	10.9%	49.3%

**TABLE 6: County Issues Tracking
General Items**

Item	Mean Rating*	Major Problem	Moderate Problem	Minor or No Problem	Grew Worse	No Change	Improved
Impact of natural disaster (drought, flood, fire, tornado, etc.)	3.33	60.6%	19.1%	20.3%	75.2%	21.4%	3.4%
Availability of water	3.16	42.3%	37.1%	20.5%	76.3%	21.9%	1.8%
Economic conditions	3.14	37.4%	42.5%	20.1%	76.5%	18.9%	4.7%
Highway/road maintenance & development	3.01	34.6%	41.8%	23.7%	39.1%	42.0%	18.9%
Availability of affordable housing	2.90	28.8%	38.2%	32.9%	28.4%	61.2%	10.4%
Preemption of local control by federal/state government	2.65	18.7%	37.3%	44.0%	27.9%	71.4%	0.8%
Population growth and development	2.55	16.8%	38.9%	44.4%	32.7%	55.7%	11.6%
Improving quality of public education	2.47	13.8%	38.3%	47.9%	15.2%	62.4%	22.4%
Access to quality medical treatment	2.45	14.4%	34.9%	50.7%	20.0%	69.1%	10.9%
Landfill/solid waste disposal issues	2.20	13.1%	21.8%	65.1%	24.3%	67.1%	8.6%
Need for new jails or prison facilities	2.11	19.4%	15.2%	65.3%	21.2%	67.2%	11.6%
County government relations with state government	2.09	7.4%	20.3%	72.4%	22.1%	67.3%	10.6%
Citizen participation in county government	2.08	10.5%	23.1%	66.4%	12.0%	78.8%	9.2%
Water quality problems	2.08	10.0%	23.5%	66.5%	19.1%	72.7%	8.2%
Violent crime	2.05	1.1%	22.9%	76.0%	12.2%	80.5%	7.3%
County government relations with cities & districts	1.93	3.0%	13.6%	83.4%	9.7%	64.7%	25.6%
Race relations	1.56	1.6%	9.8%	88.6%	8.0%	84.7%	7.2%

*Mean ratings are based on the following scale: 4=major problem, 3=moderate problem, 2=minor problem, and 1=no problem.

**TABLE 7: County Issues Tracking
County Budget Items**

Item	Mean Rating*	Major Problem	Moderate Problem	Minor or No Problem	Grew Worse	No Change	Improved
Insurance costs	3.65	74.0%	17.9%	8.1%	89.0%	11.0%	0.0%
Maintaining quality services with tighter budget	3.28	48.4%	35.1%	16.5%	72.0%	23.4%	4.5%
Unfunded federal/state mandates	3.24	41.2%	43.3%	15.5%	57.4%	42.6%	0.0%
Funding capital projects	3.03	39.6%	31.2%	29.2%	45.6%	45.7%	8.8%
Need for additional federal/state aid	2.84	26.0%	40.3%	33.7%	45.9%	49.8%	4.3%
Revenue/spending limits	2.83	28.6%	38.2%	33.2%	45.1%	51.3%	3.6%
Declining sales tax revenues	2.61	25.9%	23.8%	50.3%	65.2%	29.6%	5.1%
Upgrading county information systems	2.45	14.1%	28.9%	57.1%	25.4%	48.1%	26.5%
Finding and keeping quality personnel	2.38	9.9%	33.6%	56.5%	22.0%	71.6%	6.3%
Shrinking property tax revenues	2.34	23.5%	21.6%	54.9%	48.2%	46.9%	4.9%
Inflation	2.31	15.5%	21.9%	62.5%	24.8%	72.8%	2.4%

*Mean ratings are based on the following scale: 4=major problem, 3=moderate problem, 2=minor problem, and 1=no problem.

**TABLE 8: County Issues Tracking
Growth-Related Items**

Item	Mean Rating*	Major Problem	Moderate Problem	Minor or No Problem	Grew Worse	No Change	Improved
Increasing demands on local services/facilities due to growth	2.74	13.8%	56.4%	29.8%	58.2%	39.5%	2.3%
Paying for growth impacts	2.70	27.3%	28.2%	44.5%	38.7%	54.8%	6.5%
Traffic congestion	2.38	19.7%	28.4%	51.9%	46.3%	51.6%	2.0%
Protecting agricultural interests from growth	2.38	19.6%	25.7%	54.7%	31.8%	61.5%	6.7%
Lack of citizen consensus regarding growth	2.41	16.0%	28.1%	55.9%	20.4%	74.0%	5.6%
Land use/zoning/planning issues	2.34	12.5%	30.3%	57.2%	24.1%	54.2%	21.6%
Balancing growth impacts and quality of life	2.21	6.2%	34.7%	59.0%	22.2%	72.1%	5.7%
Balancing growth impacts and the environment	2.19	9.1%	29.5%	61.4%	20.7%	70.0%	9.3%
Preparing/updating county master plans	2.06	11.1%	23.0%	65.9%	12.4%	63.1%	24.5%
Increasing crime due to growth	1.88	1.5%	17.7%	80.8%	21.8%	74.0%	4.2%
Insufficient open space, trails, recreational facilities	1.72	3.4%	14.7%	81.9%	12.4%	76.1%	11.5%

*Mean ratings are based on the following scale: 4=major problem, 3=moderate problem, 2=minor problem, and 1=no problem.

**TABLE 9: County Issues Tracking
Economic Development Items**

Item	Mean Rating*	Major Problem	Moderate Problem	Minor or No Problem	Grew Worse	No Change	Improved
Lack of jobs that pay “living wages”	3.33	51.1%	32.6%	16.3%	48.4%	49.6%	1.9%
Need to diversify economic base	3.26	47.8%	31.6%	20.7%	42.3%	48.0%	9.7%
Need for economic development in general	3.24	47.4%	32.9%	19.7%	43.2%	47.5%	9.3%
Impact of natural disaster on local economy	3.05	46.0%	23.1%	30.9%	64.4%	33.9%	1.6%
Preserving the agricultural economy	2.96	44.1%	25.1%	30.7%	50.2%	46.3%	3.5%
Availability of affordable child care	2.96	31.1%	35.0%	33.9%	34.4%	58.1%	7.5%
Lack of infrastructure to attract new businesses	2.93	40.1%	23.9%	36.0%	34.0%	58.8%	7.2%
Poverty	2.54	19.5%	23.9%	56.6%	34.5%	63.1%	2.4%
Lack of trained/educated/skilled workers	2.51	18.8%	33.8%	47.3%	27.2%	68.7%	4.1%
Unemployment	2.43	13.0%	32.4%	54.6%	38.1%	58.2%	3.7%

*Mean ratings are based on the following scale: 4=major problem, 3=moderate problem, 2=minor problem, and 1=no problem.